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THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMANS TOWARD LITERARY PURSUITS

In Two Parts—Part I

In the first section of the introduction to his edition of the *Academica* of Cicero (pages 1-10, editio maior), Dr J S Reid, the well known Ciceronian scholar, writes in masterly fashion of Cicero as a scholar and a man of letters. He dwells throughout on the details of Cicero's training, particularly on the attention which at all stages of his life Cicero gave to philosophy. Two quotations will serve to sum up the entire section. On page 5 Mr Reid says: "In the midst of his busiest political occupations, when he was working his hardest for the consulship, his heart was given to the adornment of his Tusculan villa in a way suited to his literary and philosophic tastes. This may be taken as a specimen of his spirit throughout his life. He was before all things a man of letters; compared with literature, politics and oratory held quite a secondary place in his affections. Public business employed his intellect, but never his heart". Again (page 6), "I dwell with greater emphasis on these facts (sc. of Cicero's persistent devotion to study), because of the idea now spread abroad that Cicero was a mere dabbler in literature, and that his works were extempore paraphrases of Greek books (but) half understood. In truth, his appetite for every kind of literature was insatiable, and his attainments in each department considerable. He was certainly the most learned Roman of his age, with the sinible exception of Varro".

If Cicero's bent toward literary employments was as great as has been represented in these quotations, the question may well be asked, Why did not Cicero devote himself entirely to literary pursuits? Why did he take any part in public business and politics, if these matters engaged his intellect, but never his heart? The answer to these questions is not far to seek, and is to be found in the attitude of the Romans toward literature as an end in itself. Some remarks on this point will help to an ampler understanding, not only of Cicero's career, but of the progress of Latin literature in general.

Let us consider first some passages from Cicero's own writings. In the *De Senectute*, chapters xii-xviii, Cicero discusses the charge that old age robs men of pleasures. Taking advantage of the fact that *voluptas* often carried the suggestion of sensuality, he declares that men should in reality be grateful to old age if it does indeed cut them off from *voluptates*. In § 49 he declares that it is a fine thing to be freed at last from *voluptates*, for then the soul has a chance *secum esse secumque, ut dicitur, vivere*, "to become intimate with itself". He continues: Si vero habet aliquod tamquam pabulum studi atque doctrinae, nihil est otiosa senectute iucundius. Exerceri videbamus in studio dimetiendi paene caeli atque terrae C Gallum, familiarem tui patris, Scipio; quotiens illum lux noctu aliquid describere ingressum, quotiens nox opprescit, cum mane coepisset! quam delectabat eum defectiones solis et

lunae multo ante nobis praedicere! *Quid in levioribus studiis, sed tamen acutis? quam gaudebat Bello suo Punico Naevius! quam Truculento Plautus! quam Pseudolo!* Here poetry and the labor of poets are distinctly included among the *leviora studia sed tamen acuta*, and reckoned as inferior to astronomy. The latter is enthusiastically praised, because the fact that this very Gallus had predicted the eclipse of the sun which took place while the battle of Pydna was in progress and so saved the Roman army from the panic which was fatal to the Macedonians had shown convincingly how astronomy might be of great practical advantage.

The major part of the *Pro Archia* is pertinent to our discussion; it constitutes a special plea for those literary labors to which Archias had wholly devoted his life and to which Cicero himself had given no little attention. The long apology in §§ 1-3, in which he explains why he appears for Archias at all and craves indulgence for the form which his speech is to take, the plea in §§ 12, 13 that he has a right to apply to literary pursuits time which others give to questionable amusements, and the argument that poetry and literature have been of practical advantage, not only to himself in oratory, the serious business of his life, but to others also, nay to the Romans in general, through the immortalization of Roman achievements (§§ 13-30) are all most significant. Four-fifths of the speech is taken up with these matters, which a modern judge would sweep aside as irrelevant to the real point at issue, to wit, the citizenship of Archias.

Pertinent, too, are the first two chapters of the opening book of the *Tusculanae Disputationes*. In § 1 Cicero says: meum semper iudicium fuit omnia nostros aut invenisse per se sapientius quam Graecos aut accepta ab illis fecisse meliora, quae quidem digna statuissent in quibus elaborarent. In the *mores et instituta vitae*, in the management of property, in statecraft, in warfare, in *gravitas, constantia, magnitudo animi, probitas, fides* the earlier Romans at least, he continues, were superior to every other people. Doctrina Graecia nos et omni litterarum genere superabat, in quo erat facile vincere non repugnantis. No honor was accorded to the poet; hence poetry was late in coming to birth, in receiving recognition. Painting and music, too, found no honor among us; we had therefore no painters, no musicians. Mathematics, finally, were pursued only for practical purposes.

We noted above that in the *De Senectute* poetry was reckoned among the *leviora studia*. Cf Brutus § 3: Etenim si in leviorum artium studio memoriae proditum est poetas nobilis poetarum aequalium morte doluisse, quo tandem animo eius interitum ferre debui? *eius* here is Cicero's rival at the bar, Hortensius. In *De Oratore* i 209 ff one of the interlocutors, Antonius, is trying to formulate an exact definition of the term *orator*. He begins by giving sample definitions of various terms, such as *imperator, iuris consultus*, and *qui ad rem publicam*

moderandam usum et scientiam et studium suum contulit. In § 212 he continues: *Atque, ut iam ad leviora artium studia veniam, si musicus, si grammaticus, si poeta quaeratur, possim similiter explicare, quid eorum quisque profiteatur et quo non amplius ab quoque sit postulandum.* Akin to the statement quoted above from the *Tusculan Disputations* that no honor was accorded to the painter is the fact that in the *Orator*, § 5, sculptors and painters are ranked as mere *opifices*, mere artisans, and distinctly differentiated from poets and philosophers, who are characterized as *excellentes viri*. We have seen already how inferior was the status of the poet himself; of the position of the philosopher something will be said below.

If now we turn to other writers we easily find similar passages. According to Gellius xi 2 5 Cato uttered the following eulogy of the good old days of Rome: *Poeticae artis honos non erat. Si quis in ea re studebat aut sese ad convivia applicabat, grassetor vocabatur.* We may remember that in *Tusc* i § 3 Cicero tells us that Cato obiecit ut probum M Nobiliori quod is in provinciam poetas duxisset; duxerat autem consul ille in Aetoliam, ut scimus, Ennium. We may note also the direction in which Cato's mental activity exerted itself, toward oratory, history, and the treatment of agricultural subjects, all, to Roman thinking, intensely practical themes.

We may turn now to consider the feeling of the Romans toward the study of philosophy. In Plautus *Captivi* 263 ff Hegio is questioning Philocrates, whom he confounds with Tyndarus, concerning the social and financial position of Philocrates. 282-284 run thus:

HE. quid pater ? vivitne ? PHILOC. vivom, quom inde abimus, liquimus. nunc vivat necne, id Orcum scire oportet scilicet.

TY. salva res est: philosophatur quoque iam, non mendax modo est. In *Mercator* 145-147 this dialogue occurs between Acanthio, a *servus*, and Charinus, an *adulescens*:

CH. dic mihi, an boni quid usquam est quod quisquam uti possiet sine malo, omni aut ne laborem capias quom illo (=bono) uti voles?

AC. nescio ego istaec: philosophari numquam didici neque scio. Cf also *Pseudolus* 972-974:

SIMIA. pauci istuc faciunt homines quod tu praedicas, nam in foro vix decumus quisque est qui ipsus sese noverit. PSEUDOLUS. salvos sum: iam philosophatur.

Of these passages the last two must be interpreted in the light of the first; all three condemn philosophy, as a form of quibbling and word-juggling closely akin to lying. In the *Rudens* 986 Gripus, unable to make immediate reply to a nice point urged by Trachalio, seeks to wither him with the one cry *philosophie!* In dealing with Plautus we often find it difficult to draw the line between what is borrowed from the Greek, what is distinctly Roman rather than Greek, and what is at once both Roman and Greek. Here we can appeal to such a passage as *Anabasis* ii 1 13 as proof that the thought with which we are dealing was entertained by the Greeks themselves. To Phalinus, messenger from the Persian king to the Greeks, one of the latter, Theopompus, says: "We decline to give up our arms; all we have is our arms and our valor. If we keep our arms we shall be able to bring our valor into play; if we give up our arms we shall lose life itself. Do not imagine that we shall surrender to you the only

good thing we have; nay, we shall use our arms to fight with you for the good things you have". Then Phalinus said with a smile: "Well, you're like a philosopher, my fine youth, and you talk not unpleasantly; know, however, that you are a fool, if you believe your valor could overcome the king's power". That the feeling against philosophy was also truly Roman appears from many passages. In the second chapter of his life of Epaminondas Nepos names those who taught Epaminondas to play and sing and dance. He speaks also of Epaminondas's study of philosophy and of his devotion to his teacher, Lysis the Pythagorean. He continues thus: *atque haec ad nostram consuetudinem sunt levia et potius contemnenda; at in Graecia, utique olim, magnae laudi erant.* Cf Nepos's brief but instructive Praefatio. Tacitus *Agricola* IV declares that Agricola himself often said that in his youth he had drunk of philosophy more eagerly quam concessum (est) Romano ac senatori, ni prudentia matris incensum ac flagrantem animum coercuisset.

But here again we may cite the testimony of Cicero himself. Mr. Reid (*Academica* p 23) says: "It is strange to find Cicero making such elaborate apologies for devoting himself to the study of philosophy, and a careless reader might set them down to egotism. But it must never be forgotten that at Rome all literary and artistic pursuits were merely the amusement of the wealthy; the total devotion of a life to them seemed well enough for Greeks, but for Romans unmanly and unpractical". This, then, is why Cicero in practically all of his more ambitious philosophical writings apologizes for such writings; in some cases, as in the *Tusculans* and the *De Officiis*, the prefatory passages of the individual books present in varying forms justification of his devotion to philosophy.

A striking passage is *Tusculans* ii § 4: *Est enim philosophia paucis contenta iudiciis, multitudinem consulto ipsa fugiens, eique ipsi et suspecta et invisa, ut vel si quis universam velit vituperare secundo id populo facere possit vel si in eam quam nos maxime sequimur conetur invadere magna habere possit auxilia a relinquentur philosophorum disciplinis (schools).* Nos autem universae philosophiae vituperatoribus respondimus in Hortensio. In *De Officiis* ii § 3-4 he cries, "Would that our commonwealth had lived on with form unchanged! in that case, in agendo plus quam in scribendo operae poneremus, deinde ipsis scriptis non ea quae nunc, sed actiones nostras mandaremus. In *De Natura Deorum* i §§ 7-9 he justifies at length his philosophical writing; it is, he says, for the good of the state, public conditions leave him unemployed otherwise, he cannot endure to do nothing, his writing relieves the distress he feels by reason of the death of his Tulliola. But best of all, perhaps, is the long preface to the *De Finibus*, i §§ 1-12. "I was not unaware, my dear Brutus", says Cicero, § 1, "that my attempt to set forth in Latin the philosophical speculations of the Greeks would expose me to criticism of divers sorts. Nam quibusdam et eis quidem non admodum inductis totum hoc displicet, philosophari. Others again find no fault with such study, si remissius agatur, but feel that it is not right to devote so much interest and labor to this subject. Postremo aliquos futuros suspicor qui me ad alias litteras vocent, genus hoc scribendi, etsi sit elegans, personae tamen et dignitatis esse negent."

CHARLES KNAPP